

PASSOVER IMAGERY IN FIRST CORINTHIANS 5:7

Christopher M. Ciccarino

*Immaculate Conception Seminary School of Theology
Seton Hall University*

Introduction

Few of the congregations Paul established during his missionary journeys were as colorful—or as frustrating—as the one he founded in the Greek city of Corinth in the early '50s. This little group, despite having been graced with Paul's presence and teaching ministry for a considerable length of time, developed an extensive and disappointing array of moral, social, liturgical, and theological troubles.¹ Word of these problems reached Paul both by letter and personal report. One of the apostle's responses to these difficulties has come down to us as the First Letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians. Among the moral problems in Corinth that Paul had to address was the case of a man living with his stepmother, an issue he attempts to treat in 1 Corinthians 5. Matter-of-factly, the apostle reminds his converts that "Christ our Passover has been sacrificed, so let us keep the feast."² The striking image of Christ as "our Passover" is readily understandable to Christians of the present day and is found abundantly throughout Christian thought and theology, art and architecture. However, it may have been different for Paul's Corinthian converts. Something like a shooting star in the Pauline firmament, "Christ our Passover" is neither introduced nor explained, nor does he make use of it ever again. Paul simply expects that his hearers will understand what he means when he speaks of Jesus in terms of the great feast of liberation for the people of God. Concerning this absolutely unique phrase, C.K. Barrett asked plaintively, "This statement of fact and this exhortation are perfectly apt to the situation disclosed in this chapter. But why does Paul cast his argument in this form?"³ Alas, this great New Testament scholar did not answer the question he posed.

1 These included divisions based on inordinate attachment to personalities (1:12–13; 3:3–4), economic and social status (1:26–31), desire for rhetorically eloquent preaching (2:1–5), incest (5), litigation before pagan judges (6), marriage, separation, and remaining single (7), the eating of idol offerings and the concomitant danger of idolatry (8–10), disorderly worship (11–14), and a denial of the resurrection of the dead (15). John Kilgallen (*First Corinthians* [New York: Paulist Press, 1987], 9) comments: "The Corinthians could be addressed as 'holy ones,' but upon reading the first letter to the Corinthians with awareness, one understands how wide a net Paul must use to fit them all under that lofty name."

2 1 Cor. 5:7.

3 C. K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 129.

This image deserves careful and sustained attention to understand how the apostle thought and the truth which he wanted to communicate to his readers, ancient and modern.⁴ As Paul appealed to Passover, it is to Passover and its rich history we ought to turn.

This investigation is divided into three broad sections. The first section will summarize main themes which underlie the understanding of Passover in the Hebrew Bible, intertestamental sources, and the New Testament itself. In this way, the symbolic world in which Paul was operating and from which he drew this image will be delineated.

Once this material has been assembled and the worldview from which Paul is operating is understood, the worldview to which he is calling his converts can be explored.

Finally, we will see how his appropriation of Passover and application of it to Jesus brings the Scriptures, the worldview of Old Testament Israel, and the mystery of Christ into a profound relationship that begins to create new meanings for both.

I. The Symbolic World From Which Paul Was Operating

Passover in the Old Testament

“Why is this night different from all other nights?” For centuries Jewish households have listened to the youngest child of the family pose this question and have heard recounted the breathtaking description of the mighty acts with which the Lord favored their ancestors, how he “with a mighty hand and outstretched arm” rescued their fathers from an ancient slavery, and, on one fateful night, executed judgment upon their captors, exacting a terrible price for the servitude of his Chosen People. The commemoration of this liberation has given hope to the children of Israel throughout the ages, and we can well imagine the minds of Paul and the other first Christians being formed by this narrative.

4 Paul’s usage of succinct and dense symbols (like Passover)—what Margaret Mitchell has called “Paul’s apophatic shorthand”—has been called one of the most important responsibilities of Pauline scholars. She reflects, “Because these shorthand formulations are geared for each specific argumentative context and purpose, they are essential clues for exegesis, and deserve careful and sustained attention” (“Rhetorical Shorthand in Pauline Argumentation: The Functions of ‘The Gospel’ in the Corinthian Correspondence,” in *Gospel in Paul*, eds. L. Ann Jervis and Peter Richardson, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series* 108 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 88. On the one hand, they enabled Paul to capture and communicate to his readers, in a few words, an enduring truth. On the other hand, it was often difficult for Paul’s congregations to follow his train of thought, precisely because he employed this form of shorthand. For Paul’s modern readers, separated even more from the apostle than his original congregations by distances of language, time, and culture, the task of detecting and deciphering Paul’s images is all the more important.

The greatest concentration of occurrences of the term “Passover” in the Torah appears in the Book of Exodus, both in the narrative of the final and mightiest of the acts of the Lord by which he liberates the children of Israel from their servitude in Egypt and in the renewal of the covenant following the episode of the golden calf.⁵ For ancient Israelites, these Passover verses of Exodus form the core of the account of the miraculous deliverance of the children of Israel from slavery in Egypt. It is the major formative event in Israel’s history. Given the absence of officiating priest and altar, it is generally thought that the Passover actually had its origin well prior to the Exodus event, in Israel’s dim nomadic past. It may have begun as a spring rite seeking divine protection as young are born to flocks and new pastures are sought:

The season when sheep and goats drop their young and when this journey to the summer pastures is undertaken is a dangerous and decisive time for the well-being of the flock. No one knows what dangers await on the road, the state of the pastures themselves, or how one will be welcomed on arrival. . . . It is natural that the Israelite Passover ritual should be associated with the moment of departure of the people of God for this great change of pastures.⁶

Such an offering would have naturally lent itself to reinterpretation during the Exodus experience. Passover appears as part of the instruction of the Lord to Moses (Exod. 12:11, 13) and Moses to the people (Exod. 12:21, 23, 27), as well as additional commands of the Lord to Moses and Aaron following the actual flight from Egypt (Exod. 12:43, 48). In the first set, the Lord instructs Moses that the month of the Passover shall be the first month of the Hebrew calendar (Exod. 12:1–4), then specifies the slaughter of the Passover animal, the marking of the doorposts and lintel with its blood, and the consumption of the sacrifice (Exod. 12:5–10).⁷ Finally, fully eleven verses into the chapter, the name for this immense movement of divine favor is given: it is a “Passover to/for the Lord.” Furthermore, the text gives an explanation of what Passover is—it is the “passing through” of Egypt by the Lord as the firstborn of the Egyptians are smitten and judgment executed against the gods of the Egyptians (Exod. 12:12). If the Passover finds its origin in an ancient nomadic protection ritual, then the new context of Exodus infuses the ceremony with a fresh meaning. It is a demonstration of the power and the fidelity of the God of the Hebrews, who had pledged to Abram to rescue his descendants from

5 Exod. 12:11, 13, 21, 23, 27, 43, 48; 34:25.

6 Roland de Vaux, *Studies in Old Testament Sacrifice* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1964), 15.

7 It may be noted that the original sacrifice could be either a lamb or a kid goat.

oppression. Even after centuries of seeming inaction, the ancient promises still held firm. The final appearance of "Passover" in the Book of Exodus occurs in Exodus 34:25, in the renewal of the covenant following the episode of the golden calf. Passover thus marks both the liberation of the people and their reconciliation after grave sin.

Passover then appears in the Books of Leviticus,⁸ Numbers,⁹ Deuteronomy,¹⁰ as well as the Book of Joshua.¹¹ In Leviticus, Passover is treated immediately after the prescriptions on the Sabbath and occurs with the Israelites gathered in sanctuaries. In Numbers, it is recounted that Passover is no longer just a family celebration, but the work of a "holy congregation" (Num. 28:18) at the giving of the Law. In Deuteronomy, it is specified that those who are ritually impure or on a journey during Passover are permitted to celebrate the feast one month after its regular observance. Moreover, Passover is prescribed by the Lord as a means that Israel might "remember" what the Lord had done on her behalf and celebrate that remembrance at the central sanctuary of the Lord. The centrality of remembrance is something which becomes fundamental to the meaning of Passover.¹² Any time when she becomes enslaved, either physically or spiritually, Israel can again participate in the liberation of the Passover event because it has entered permanently into her history. In Joshua, Passover marks the end of the wilderness wanderings and, along with circumcision, prepares the people for entry into the Promised Land.

Among the historical books, Passover appears in 2 Kings¹³ as part of the religious reforms instituted by King Josiah. Indeed, in many ways, the celebration of Passover marks the culmination of the renewal undertaken by the righteous king. Passover marks the return of the children of Israel from the Babylonian Exile in its appearance in the Book of Ezra.¹⁴ Just as the first Exodus from captivity was marked by the celebration of Passover, so too a new Exodus marks the homecoming of the Chosen People. The largest concen-

8 Lev. 23:5.

9 Num. 9:2, 4–5; 28:16; 33:3.

10 Deut. 16:1–2, 5–6.

11 Josh. 5:10–11.

12 Brevard Childs (*Memory and Tradition in Israel* [London: SCM Press, 1962], 51–53) states, "Israel remembers what Yahweh once did to Pharaoh and Egypt. Yahweh will do so again to Israel's present enemies. Israel's memory thus serves a far more important role than merely providing illustrations from the past. It serves in making Israel noetically aware of a history which is ontologically a unity. There is only one redemptive history. . . . Israel is participating again in the Exodus event. Memory functions as an actualization (*Vergegenwärtigung*) of the decisive event in her tradition."

13 2 Kings 23:21–23.

14 Ezra 6:19–20.

tration of occurrences of the term “Passover” appears in 2 Chronicles, which recounts the Passover kept by King Hezekiah and offers another version of the Passover of Josiah. The biblical writers knew that the path to security for the nation and God’s blessings upon the people lay in no small part in cultic fidelity, which began with right keeping of the Passover celebration. Among the prophetic books, Passover appears only one time, in Ezekiel.¹⁵ Speaking of the new sanctuary and the new worship that will take place in it, Ezekiel describes the Temple in his vision, including the Passover which will take place there.

Reviewing these occurrences of “Passover” in the Hebrew Bible, several important themes might be noted. Scripture clearly understands it as part of the culminating experiences of the Exodus event. This mighty act of God was the consummate expression of his power, and because of this it developed into one of the basic optics through which the ancient Israelites viewed their life and the events of their subsequent history.

Life and history, for the ancient Israelites, are profoundly *scriptural*. In their Bible was the wellspring of Israelite thought and reflection. Through their meditation on and exegesis of their sacred texts, the Israelites came to a deeper understanding of who God was and who they were. The Lord was the God who saves; they were the people who had been saved, and life is to be lived according to the desires of the Lord as expressed in Scripture. Reflecting on Scripture, the Israelites understood that Passover had become an enduring paradigm of liberation. The wide array of uses to which the Passover was put in biblical traditions attests to both its generative capacity in Israel’s imagination and history as well as the depth to which it was absorbed into Israel’s historical consciousness. As Tamara Prosic points out, at each critical juncture in the nation’s history, it became appropriate to recall and celebrate Passover, beginning with the Passover of Egypt (Exod. 12), at the giving of the Law at Sinai (Num. 9), upon entering the Promised Land (Josh. 5), upon the return from Exile (Ezra 6), and as a foundation for authentic reform (under both Hezekiah, 2 Chron. 30, and Josiah, 2 Kings 23; 2 Chron. 35).¹⁶ Passover is part of the process of reconciliation after grave sin (Exod. 34) and will form part of the promise of a restored worship in a renewed Temple (Ezek. 45).

This creative “re-use” of Passover was part of a wider project of intra-biblical exegesis within the Hebrew Scriptures. The essential traditions of the Hebrew Scriptures became the basic building blocks of later traditions. This re-working is described by Michael Fishbane, who denotes the content of a received tradition as the *traditum* and uses the term *traditio* to refer to the

15 Ezek. 45:21.

16 Tamara Prosic, *The Development and Symbolism of Passover until 70 CE*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 414 (New York: T & T Clark, 2004), 82.

creative process of transmission that the *tradtum* undergoes. As a *tradtum*, such as Passover, was transformed through the process of the *tradtio*, it fused with it and became a new *tradtum*, and what can be called a “snowball effect” ensued. The *tradtum* took on new significances without losing its older ones:

Recalling the classic observation of TS Eliot, that every significant addition to a literary corpus repositions all the components of that corpus, we may add that each event of the aggadic *tradtio* in ancient Israel simultaneously serves to reconstellate a given *tradtum* in relationship to those in the culture who perform or apprehend the exegesis, and to reorder the hierarchy of teachings within the cultural palimpsest thus formed.¹⁷

The depth and richness of their biblical reflection informed the concept of *history* among the ancient Israelites. Passover was a permanent and abiding record of God’s will and ability to save his people. They were no longer passive objects of unjust suffering, but people who had experienced vindication. The history of Passover was necessarily formative for the Israelites, not only from the confidence it gave them in the fidelity of the Lord, but also as a people. Their experience of a family ritual celebrated on a national scale enhanced the affinity the tribes felt for one another. All Israel could be seen as the one family of God. The experience of pilgrimage to Jerusalem could be transformative for the self-consciousness of individual Jews. The worshipper in the Temple, through Passover, became contemporary with all of the past and all of the future generations of Israel.

The unity that the Israelite felt with the Lord and his people meant that Passover also became a call to right relationship with his fellow Israelites and right obedience to the Lord.¹⁸ Individual sins and impurities became a community-wide concern that gradually intensified over time during the biblical period; the defects or lawlessness of the individual could have grave repercussions for the whole, which would be completely in contradiction to the inherent meaning of Passover:

Passover is never represented as a qualitatively indifferent change in a sense that it is never just another development in the history of the Israelites. Passover always means pro-

17 Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 435.

18 Theodore Gaster (*Passover: Its History and Traditions* [Westport: Greenwood Press, 1984], 93) comments: “Freedom, says the Passover message, is redemption through God. It is not because they went out of Egypt that Israel became a free people; it is because they set their faces toward Sinai.”

motion of those values and the new condition is always an improvement of the one that preceded it. Passover always means betterment.¹⁹

Passover in the Intertestamental Period

Although the importance of Passover in ancient Israel may seem obvious to the modern reader, the number and diversity of intertestamental texts in which “Passover” appears are a clear indication of how widespread both the celebration and consideration of Passover had become in the life of the ancient Jews.²⁰ It appears in ancient correspondence, both in ordinary and official letters.²¹ It was the subject of popular entertainment.²² Passover was reflected upon and written about both in what would develop into mainstream Judaism as well as in sectarian Judaism.²³ Attempts were made to introduce and

19 Prosic, *Development and Symbolism*, 82.

20 The usage is summarized below. It ought to be stressed that this data represents only lexical occurrences of Passover in extant literature. The semantic field of the word and concept in are considerably greater still.

In correspondence:	4x
In literature:	
Jubilees	10x
<i>Qumran</i>	31x
<i>Aristobulus</i>	2x
<i>Ezekielos</i>	2x
<i>Philo</i>	17x
<i>Pseudo-Philo</i>	2x
<i>Josephus</i>	18x

21 Specifically, texts of two private letters from Elephantine, Egypt and one official letter discovered there as well. The text and translation for the ostraca may be found in Bezalel Porten and Ada Yardeni (eds.), *Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Egypt*, 4 vols. (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 4:158, 174. The papyrus letter may be found in 1:54–55.

22 The *Exagōgē* of Ezekielos, a second-century BC Jewish playwright living in Alexandria, bears witness to this. The surviving text of his play may be found in Bruno Snell, *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta*, 5 vols. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986), 1:296–298.

23 See, for example, the extensive usage by Philo and Josephus of Passover, on the one hand, and Qumran, on the other. A convenient location for the text of Philo and Josephus can be found in the Loeb Classical Library editions of their works, while the texts of Qumran can be located in the Discoveries in the Judean Desert series.

explain Passover to Gentile audiences.²⁴ Passover, particularly as it became a pilgrimage festival to Jerusalem, served Jewish self-identification and interaction within the community.

The Lord, the People, the Future

Reviewing how Passover is treated in intertestamental writings, the theology of the feast deepened, developing three foci: *the Lord, the people, and the end*.

Passover invited those who observed the feast to remember before all else the mighty acts which the *Lord* had performed on behalf of his people. The Israelites knew that their Lord had revealed something of his personality through the events of Passover. They knew that their God was a God who cared passionately for his people and their God was a God who had the capacity to rescue them from their slavery, no matter how abject it may have seemed. They are the reasons Israel could survive in a hostile and perilous world. While God is at the heart of Passover, the second theological focus of Passover was on the *children of Israel* themselves.

Through the experience of Passover, the ancient Israelites were formed concretely into the Chosen People of Yahweh. This was equally true both for the ancient Israelites who experienced the historical events memorialized in Passover as well as for their descendants. Their commemoration of Passover incorporates the Jewish people into the original Passover generation. The memorial effected at Passover “spliced,” as it were, the present Jew into the past event. Those who kept the Passover were thus present in a real way to their ancestors and to the salvation which God had worked on their behalf. The Passover event had the power to travel from the past to the present. And the cultic remembrance of Passover was also joined, at least from the time of Josiah on, with the experience of pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem. Ordinary pilgrims would experience solidarity and continued community with their wider people. Just as the observant Jew keeping Passover experienced communion with God and with his ancestors, so too he experienced communion with his contemporaries.

The third theological focus of Passover turned its attention on *the future*. Passover had developed a significant range of eschatological features. To celebrate Passover was to express thanksgiving for what God had done and to express the confidence that the Lord would once again act on behalf of his chosen in their need. Passover’s eschatological potential, already seen within the biblical trajectory, reached full flower in intertestamental literature, with ever-increasing potency.²⁵ A celebration of God’s might and fidelity; an expres-

24 See, for example, the *Exagōgē* of Ezekielos and the writings of Josephus. The writings of Philo may also be tentatively placed here.

25 Eckart Otto comments: “During the 1st century BCE, the messianic-eschatological mood

sion of solidarity as a people both in the past and in days to come; the promise of a hope-filled future—these are fundamental parts of what Passover had come to mean theologically for the Jewish people.

Passover in the New Testament

As has been seen, the world into which the first Christian community and the authors of the New Testament came was one where the experience of Passover had made an exceptionally significant and enduring mark. By the time of Christ, the theology and practice of Passover had woven their way throughout the warp and woof of the rich tapestry which constituted first-century Judaism. Passover filled the spirits of the Jewish people with gratitude to the Lord for their election and freedom, as well as hope in his continuing care. It combined both the remembrance of the original Passover and the accumulation of all the other saving events that had been linked to Passover throughout Jewish history. Thus, the celebration enabled those who participated in the ritual commemoration to “pass over,” as it were, a type of threshold into a different—and deeper—order of *communio* within history.

Passover reminded those who celebrated it of the care and power exercised on their behalf by the God of Israel. Passover pointed loyal believers to their past. It reminded those who celebrated it of their enduring solidarity with their ancestors. At the same time, Passover also pointed believers to the future. Passover had become the pledge and promise of definitive deliverance. These conclusions had grown out of a world view in which the devoted Jew searched the Scriptures “to derive paradigms from the sacred events of the past by which they could then interpret and respond to contemporary events.”²⁶

The contemporary event that Christians had to interpret and respond to in the first century was the life, ministry, death, and Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. This they did through assuming the vivid meanings of Passover and re-contextualizing them around him. The contours of how they did so are preserved in the writings of the New Testament. A reader may be surprised as to how relatively few times the term “Passover” appears in the writings of the New Testament. Yet, where it appears and how it is used are extremely signif-

of Passover became increasingly visible, expressing itself in the Hallel singing, especially in the double recitation of Ps 118:25–26 (*bārûk habbā' b'šēm yhwēh*)” (see Eckart Otto, “חֲסֵד,” in *The Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, eds. G. Botterweck, H. Ringgren, and H. J. Fabry, 15 vols. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003], 12:21). De Vaux (*Sacrifice*, 24) states: “Just as in Egypt, Passover had been a night of watching for Yahweh, so in later times it was celebrated in the expectation of a new visitation by God.”

26 Zev Garber, “Interpreting the Passover Haggadah,” in *Experiencing the Exodus*, ed. Duane Christensen (Berkeley: BIBAL Press, 1988), 56.

icant. The feast of the Passover was seen as both a fundamental chronological note and a theological fact in forming the life of Jesus Christ.

The natural place to begin an understanding of Passover in the New Testament is with the Last Supper and the Passion narratives. "Passover" was deployed at particularly strategic locations within the Passion narratives to guide and influence the reader's understanding of the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, what would, in time, come to be called "The Paschal Mystery."²⁷ Specialists are engaged in a lively discussion about whether or not the Last Supper was a regular repast, a specialized meal (*todah*, *haburah*, *kiddush*, or Qumran meal) or a Passover dinner. Scholars also consider whether the synoptic gospels or John preserve more accurately the precise date of the Last Supper. The in-breaking of God's kingdom, which the first Christians saw accomplished in the Passion of Christ, was explained by the eschatological hope that had grown up around Passover. In Jesus, the long-awaited and hoped-for definitive Passover had finally come true for good. In John's Gospel, Passover is strategically deployed by the evangelist at the beginning, middle, and end of Jesus' ministry to reveal more deeply who Jesus is.

The New Testament's use of Passover indicates both fundamental continuity with Israel's understanding of Passover and a distinctive transformation in its interpretive arc. In Christ, the Christians saw that the final act to which all salvation history pointed had taken place. The Christians thus brought together the Passovers of Israel and of Jesus and let them interpret one another. Passover explained who Jesus really was, and Jesus explained what Passover really was. For the first Christians, the realization began to dawn that the most important eschatological events had already happened in the death and Resurrection of Jesus. His followers now found themselves "on the other side," so to speak, of the eschaton, watching the outworking of what had been accomplished as the hopes of Israel were in the process of being realized.

As Jesus and all of his immediate disciples were Jews, and the early Christian community and its thought grew out of first-century Judaism, it is not at all surprising that the first Christians envisioned and spoke of their world utilizing the same thought categories as did all other Jews. Something extraordinary had taken place in their lives in Jesus Christ, and, as this good news was proclaimed, it was also investigated: "The 'good tidings' consist primarily in the news of what has happened; to understand *how* they are 'good tidings,' they must be related to what has gone before."²⁸ Moreover, the

27 E. Earle Ellis (*Paul's Use of the Old Testament* [Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2003], 133) comments: "The connection of Christ's death with the Passover is one of the cardinal points of the passion narratives."

28 C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures* (Digswell Place: James Nisbet and Co., 1952), 14.

christological interpretation of the Old Testament by the early Christians was informed both by the text of the Hebrew Bible and the interpretive patterns that had developed prior to the advent of Christianity. Paul would make ample use of these exegetical approaches and methods and ultimately shape them as well. Paul connected Christ to a sign that was unmistakable in its significance, both biblically and in the confluence of Jewish tradition. He was not simply providing the Corinthians with information but was pointing them towards a new order of recognition. Passover was a door opening into a vast world of meaning, multidimensional, with a tremendously rich biblical and interpretative history.

II. The Symbolic Worldview to Which Paul Was Calling His Converts

Paul and Passover

All of what has been reviewed reveals that the Jewish thought world from which Paul draws the image of Passover had linked the already-rich biblical content of it with a series of theological insights developed over an extended period of time. These insights were then augmented and transformed by the Christian community, including Paul himself. The theology of Passover revolves, in great part, around God, the people, and eschatology. Much like a theological iceberg, all of this lay “below the surface,” as it were, for Paul and his Corinthian converts, as the apostle reminds them that “Christ our Passover has been sacrificed.” The frequency of this identification in subsequent Christian theology has inured us to the magnitude of what the apostle does in his First Letter to the Corinthians. For the first time in history, a person is called “our Passover.”

Did it work for Paul, or did his appeal to Passover fall on deaf ears? While a majority of the Corinthian Christians came from a Gentile background, Corinth also had a significant Jewish population. This population would also have given rise to at least some “God-fearers,” a category of Gentiles which was particularly open to early Christian evangelization. These Gentiles would have developed some level of familiarity with the central tenets of Judaism. Thus the Jewish members of the Corinthian congregation and those Gentile members who were familiar with the Jewish faith would have formed a solid core who grasped the Passover imagery that Paul employed.²⁹ As a result, Paul’s use of Passover here functions as a well-aimed rhetorical arrow that hits the heart of his subject. What did the apostle hope to accomplish?

29 Bruce Winter (*After Paul Left Corinth* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001], 157) states: “Paul’s use of Passover imagery without needing explication and his reference to the third cup of wine and the Passover meal as ‘the cup of blessing which we bless’ and ‘the bread which we break’ again without explanation suggests that all the congregation was well aware of the Passover.”

Passover and Christ

"Who do people say that I am?" (Mark 8:27). This question of Jesus has been intriguing those who have come into contact with him since he first began his public ministry in Galilee. For much of Christian history, the faithful were content to live with the answer volunteered by Simon Peter. However, with the eighteenth-century advent of the use of historical critical methods in biblical studies and investigations into "the life of Jesus," academics in the West began to formulate a new understanding of who Jesus was. This new narrative began to coalesce about the christology of the early Church. It was believed that, during the life of Jesus and in the years which followed, a "low christology" held sway. Jesus did not consider himself divine, nor did his followers. He was a preacher who ran afoul of the political and spiritual leaders of his land, who put him to death rather than permit him to disturb the status quo. Then, gradually, his disciples began to ascribe to Jesus miraculous powers, claims of unique authority, and—ultimately—divine identity. This revolution transformed the "low christology" believed contained in early New Testament writings into the "high christology" of the later New Testament and emergent Church. These academics therefore considered the Gospel of Mark, which did not contain any "legendary" birth or Resurrection accounts, to be manifestly the earliest Gospel, while Jesus' claims to preexistence and the Divine Name in the Gospel of John indicated that the ossification of the "Jesus of history" into the "Christ of faith" was all but complete by the close of the New Testament period.³⁰ While most contemporary New Testament and Pauline scholars eschew such one-dimensional views, nevertheless, the Christological debates of the modern academy continue to frame our understanding of the christology that Paul expresses in 1 Corinthians 5:7.

The christology contained in this verse can be considered under three general headings. The first is the absolute centrality of Christ to the reflection of the apostle and all of the first Christians. When they thought to understand their world or establish how they ought to act, they did so in conscious and creative theological dialogue with what they had learned concerning Jesus Christ. The second concerns the Jewish roots that Paul's theology reflects. Paul's christology in this verse is not created out of whole cloth, but rather rests as the capstone of an extensive theological edifice created by the interplay of Scripture and tradition within Judaism. The third concerns the nature of the soteriology contained in 1 Corinthians 5:7. Part of the aca-

30 I readily acknowledge that this summary hardly does justice to the range of views or the scholarship of these early authors, nor were all necessarily anti-supernaturalistic. My simplifications serve only to illustrate the points that still occur often in the academy and popular media. For a convenient summary of development in the modern history of biblical christology, see Joseph Fitzmyer, *Scripture and Christology* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1986), 5–16.

demic understanding of the trajectory in New Testament christology from “low” to “high” is the development of a “sacrificial” understanding of Christ’s death on the part of Christians. 1 Corinthians 5:7 bears witness that this understanding took place at a time earlier than is sometimes acknowledged.

The Centrality of Christ

There can be no doubt as to what constituted the center of Paul’s thought and action. He himself expressed it well towards the beginning of his letter to his Corinthian converts: “I resolved to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2). In grasping this passionate disciple’s understanding of who Christ is, the contemporary reader of Paul’s letters, however, is faced with two challenges.

First, we stand at a far distance from the in-depth relationships that the apostle shared with his congregations. As the spiritual father and primary evangelizer of his communities, Paul had an immediate and intimate knowledge of what his congregations knew (or, at least, were supposed to know) about Jesus. Many things in their dialogue together could thus be left unsaid. We do not share the closeness that the apostle and his converts shared—indeed, we do not even know what we do not know. This constitutes a significant hindrance.

Second, the letters of Paul contained in the New Testament are *ad hoc* documents, written to specific communities to address specific issues. Therefore, we do not find in them a tremendous amount of the elementary *kerygma* of the early Church, that basic proclamation of the good news of Christ in which Paul preaches “from the beginning,” as it were, fully and methodically who Jesus is and why he matters for his hearers. Rather, Paul’s letters tend to contain more of what has been termed *didaskalia*, an explanation and refinement of what his converts already know that seeks to deal with the specific theological and moral questions that arise within each community. As a result of this, a significant amount of data for understanding the apostle’s christology is not expressed in passages that are systematically didactic. Rather, his christology, especially at its deepest roots, tends to emerge unselfconsciously from statements of common conviction that Paul presupposes that he shares with his congregations. As Gordon Fee states, “We are seldom reading Paul’s *argued* christology, but rather his *assumed* christology.”³¹ In the case of 1 Corinthians 5:7, Paul is not arguing *for* a particular understanding of Christ, rather he is arguing *from* a particular understanding of Christ.

In 1 Corinthians 5:7, Paul declares that it is Christ who has become the Passover of his people. Here the apostle has taken up a title given to Jesus of Nazareth by his followers, who recognized in Jesus the “Christ,” the

31 Gordon Fee, *Pauline Christology* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2007), 4.

long-awaited Messiah of Israel. As is well known, a tremendous amount of research has been done into the concept(s) of “Messiah” in the Old Testament, at Qumran, and in the writings of the intertestamental period. Jesus is the “Anointed One” who was sent to act *on behalf of another*, that is, God the Father. It is therefore important that this “other-centeredness” of both Christ and Passover be given their full theological weight.

In the historical Passover, the lamb/kid served as the means that effected liberation from physical slavery for the Chosen People. It did so not because of any inherent power of its own, but because it was constituted the means of salvation by the gracious will of God. In like manner, for Paul, Jesus effected liberation from spiritual slavery on behalf of the new Chosen People precisely because it pleased the Father to entrust this role to Jesus. This correspondence between the two paschal mysteries of the Old Testament and New Testament is thus both emphasized and differentiated. On the one hand, both the lamb/kid and Jesus are instrumental in rescuing captives through their deaths. On the other hand, in the historical Passover, the sacrificial lamb remained a passive object, always acted upon throughout the whole drama.

In the thoughts of Paul and of all the first Christians, however, Jesus was not at all passive; rather, he was an entirely active subject who, in loving obedience to the will of his Father, freely chose to humble himself even to death on a cross (Phil. 2:8). The new Passover was thus not just a sacrifice, but a *self-sacrifice*. In this self-sacrifice, salvation is found. This process of typological correspondence and escalation between the Exodus-Passover and the Christ-Passover reveals concretely a costly act of love enacted by Jesus to lead fallen humanity to God the Father, an act that Paul reminded the Corinthians about several times.

The Worship and the Promises

Paul understood his basic vocation was to be the apostle to the Gentiles, to proclaim to them that, in the Messiah Jesus, other non-Jewish peoples now had the potential to become acceptable to God. In Jesus, the promises of the restoration of Israel had finally been fulfilled; into God’s original Chosen People was to be grafted in fact the whole world. And yet, this expansion of the promises of God did not at all lead Paul to migrate away from the Jewish roots of his gospel. On the contrary, it was from *within* the faith of his ancestors that Paul explained to his Gentile congregations in Corinth and elsewhere the fundamental truths of Judaism—that God was one; that he was the Creator of this world; that he had selected one people as his own; that through his people God would reconcile the world to himself; and that this divine plan had culminated in the person of Jesus. Therefore, it was entirely

natural for Paul to use the history, thought categories, and spiritual realities of his people to conceptualize and express his message about Jesus. To explain both to the world and to himself how the eternal plans of the covenant God of Israel were fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth, towards this end, the apostle bent all of his gifts.

This "Jewishness" of Paul has attracted scholars for the past several generations.³² For Paul, Jesus was a Jew, born under the Law (Gal. 4:4), sent to save both those who hitherto had lived under the Law and those who had lived outside of the Law. The identification of the Passover sacrifice with any person is utterly without precedent in the long history of Judaism. This identification of the salvation paradigm of Judaism with the person of Jesus Christ is made by Paul in a manner that indicates that he thought he was saying nothing especially contentious. Indeed, the very fact that the apostle does not need to explain his identification of Christ as Passover indicates that Paul expected the Corinthians to be well familiar with and accepting of this identification.

We find an absolutely remarkable Jewish belief that was already transformed and conventionalized and apparently uncontroversial among Paul's churches at an impressively early date, perhaps twenty years after the crucifixion and Resurrection. The very first Christian generation was already meditating on how the death of Jesus was the antitype, escalation, and fulfillment of the liberation wrought by God in the Exodus. Through taking up the feast and thought of his people, Paul is able to cause a "metamorphosis of both cultic language and cultic reality through christology."³³ That the identification of Christ as Passover was made so early and so thoroughly also demonstrates how deep was Paul's meditation on the Scriptures and history of Israel.³⁴

Paul's understanding of who he was, who Jesus was, and what the death and Resurrection of Christ meant flows from the apostle's faith in the God of Israel. The apostle must surely have felt that the understanding of Passover found in Christ enriched the meaning of the biblical Passovers. In Christ, he could be all the more at one with previous Passover generations. None of his

32 One need only mention here the classic works of David Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (New York: Arno Press, 1973), and E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).

33 Elizabeth S. Fiorenza, "Cultic Language in Qumran and in the New Testament," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 38 (1976): 171.

34 Paul's remarkable theological acuity, as well as the fact that he is the very first Christian author to make use of the identification of "Christ as Passover," gives him fair claim as the originator of the metonymy. However, a certain judgment cannot be made at this juncture concerning the one who first made this incredible hermeneutical leap. It is also possible that one of those Christians who was "in Christ" before Paul, to whom he frankly acknowledges debt (see, for example, Rom. 16:3; Gal. 1:15, 17), may have related to him this extraordinary identification.

theology would have been possible had not the apostle been a Jew attempting to articulate a Jewish understanding of a Jewish Messiah using Jewish thought categories and the Jewish Scriptures.

Sent to Save

Victor Furnish observes, "For Paul, nothing comes closer to defining the reality of God than this will and power to save."³⁵ This insight is profoundly true. In 1 Corinthians 5:7 the apostle enunciates an extremely important understanding of how God, in Christ, saves his people. If, in Paul's understanding, Jesus came to reconcile humanity with God the Father, and if Jesus did so precisely as the Jewish Messiah born of the promises that the Lord had made to his Chosen People, then in this verse Paul clearly articulates the manner in which the first Christians understood Jesus to have done so: as a sacrifice. Indeed, the sacrificial nature of Passover depicts an understanding of the event certainly shared by Paul himself, although the sacrificial conception of Christ's death is not always emphasized in contemporary systematic theology. This takes place for two reasons.

First, not infrequently, a sacrificial interpretation to the death of Christ is considered by academics to belong more properly to the christology of the Letter to the Hebrews and the later writings of the New Testament. Since these scholars hold that the chronologically earlier portions of the New Testament have a better chance of preserving a more authentic knowledge of Christ, the sacrificial understanding of his death is therefore discounted.

Second, because some scholars consider the sacrificial language contained in Paul's letters in general and 1 Corinthians 5:7 specifically to be so foreign to contemporary men and women, they favor its removal from theological discourse.³⁶ Since they consider such language to be inaccessible to the modern age, it ought to be supplanted by paradigms which are more comprehensible.

Yet, this elimination cannot be done—and for two reasons. First, to do so would inauthenticate the witness of Scripture, indeed one of the earliest of the New Testament documents. 1 Corinthians 5:7 bears witness to an inescapable fact: the identification of Christ as Passover—and as a sacrifice—was early enough and authoritative enough to have been widely distributed and

35 Victor P. Furnish, *The Theology of the First letter to the Corinthians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 41.

36 An exegete of no less stature than Ernst Käsemann stated: "If we have any concern for the clarity of the Gospel and its intelligibility to the present generation, theological responsibility compels us to abandon the ecclesiastical and biblical tradition which interprets Jesus' death as sacrificial." (Käsemann is quoted here from Gerald O'Collins, "Redemption: Some Crucial Issues," in *Redemption: an interdisciplinary symposium on Christ as Redeemer*, eds. Stephen Davis, David Kendall, and Gerald O'Collins, [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004], 12, n. 16.)

unchallenged in ancient Christianity. The sacrificial interpretation of Jesus' death does not belong to later strata of the New Testament, but is constitutive of Christian reflection from at least the time of Paul. Second, recognizing that Christ's crucifixion is a sacrifice serves to underscore the depth and intensity of God's love for his people.³⁷ As Paul would write to the Romans: "God did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all" (Rom. 8:32). It is in the freely offered sacrifice of Christ that the love of God the Father is made manifest.

Passover and the Christian People

Confronted with the tremendous reality of the Passover of the Son of God, Paul reflected about what this revealed concerning the person of Jesus Christ. Concomitant with his rethinking of traditional Jewish paradigms in order to come to an understanding of the identity and significance of Jesus of Nazareth, the apostle naturally also began a rethinking as to what it meant to be God's Chosen People, formed in a new covenant and gathered around the crucified and risen savior. This reflection was not at all the theoretical deliberations of an academic, but the entirely concrete conclusions of an itinerant missionary pastor. Paul had to explain to himself and to others why there were so many ethnic Gentiles responding positively to the Gospel, why it seemed there were so few ethnic Jews doing so, and how both groups might come together to form a single, united family of God. This ongoing task, the fruit of Paul's personal reflection, is never far below the surface in the apostle's letters. Always, in reminding his congregations who Jesus was, the apostle was also prompting his hearers to consider what their own true vocation as disciples of Christ might be.

Passover and the Self-Identity of the Christian

One of the root problems with which Paul had to deal in 1 Corinthians centered on the nature of Christian identity. This lack of concord among the Christians of Corinth was not simply based in ethnic, religious, or status rivalries. Rather, it stemmed ultimately from a lack of self-understanding, of knowing what it means to be "in Christ." The Corinthians' difficulties were, in the end, theological in nature. It is precisely because the Corinthian Christians have received a new identity that their ethical behavior must now rise to a standard different from that of the world.

In the context of 1 Corinthians 5, because Passover freedom has been obtained at such a high price—the self-sacrifice of Christ—it would be entirely unfitting for the immoral man to exercise his newfound freedom in self-indul-

37 Michael Gorman (*Cruciformity* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001], 73) comments: "In the cross, according to Paul, we learn that God is *pro nobis*, for us; in some unfathomable way, Christ's death for us both demonstrates and defines divine love."

gence, without thought for the effects of his actions on himself, still less the rest of the Christian community. The image of “Christ as Passover” helped explain who they were in a positive fashion. In the image of Christ as Passover, the apostle knew that the Corinthians would find not simply christology, but a “spiritual mirror” that would reveal them to themselves. They are now part of the new covenant people of God. A clear distinction exists between them and the rest of the population of their city because their Passover has come.

If Christ is defined as “Passover,” then the past life of the Corinthians is thereby necessarily defined as slavery. If Christ is defined as “Passover,” then his death and Resurrection reveal a mighty act of God as fearsome and as numinous as the destroying angel who passed over Egypt. If Christ is defined as “Passover,” then the follower of Jesus stands marked out as indelibly as an Israelite doorpost.

As was noted, examining the Passovers described in the Bible indicates that the feast had become an important ritual threshold in salvation history. It always differentiates and separates two periods in the story of the Lord’s People. In each case, the events which follow the Passover stand in complete antithesis to the events which preceded the Passover. The Corinthian Christians, by coming to faith in Jesus Christ, had crossed a new threshold in salvation history. Though physically in Corinth, theologically they had passed into a different stage of their spiritual journey. While they might murmur like the Israelites in the wilderness, it was inconceivable to Paul that they might return to their old land of slavery. They had been rescued and set free—now they had to live that way.

Passover and the Formation of a Christian Worldview

In Israelite history, Passover marks a radical break with what has gone on before and marks a grace-filled new beginning. The miraculous Passover liberations that God worked on his people’s behalf were all extraordinary, but in no case did they bring about definitive deliverance from temptation to infidelity and the possibility of falling away from God’s grace. Rather, in each case, after the Lord had completed his work, there was still something left for the people to accomplish. They had to accept being rescued on God’s terms rather than their own and they had to live in grateful fidelity within bounds outlined for them by God. Thus, the Exodus Passover, for example, meant that the Israelites had to renounce the right to remain in Egypt, the realm of slavery and idolatry. They were rescued from the house of servitude, but they were not yet in the Promised Land. A long wilderness journey lay before them.

At the Passover of Sinai, the people had received the great gift of the Law, but now it was incumbent that they adhere to it. At the Passover of Joshua,

while the children of Israel had completed their years of wandering, they still had to take possession of the land, a laborious and violent process. In the Passover following the return from Babylon, while it marked the end of exile, there was still the process of rebuilding and reintegration with those who had been left behind. The royal Passovers did indicate a new start in the religious life of Israel, but, as history sadly showed, they also left open the possibility for renewed infidelity. Only with the ideal Passover of the prophets (see, for example, Ezek. 45) did the deliverance of God's people become definitive and with no further need of effort on their part.

The history of Passover also reminded God's people that the deliverance of the Lord was both a gift and a task—they had an indispensable role to play in living out what God had accomplished for them. Reflecting upon these realities crystallizes what it means to be God's people and to respond with fidelity to what the Lord has wrought.

The Passover task for God's people is certainly clear in the Old Testament accounts concerning the feast. Something similar must have been obtained as well in the thinking of Paul and the first Christians as they contemplated their Passover, Christ. The Passover of Christ means that deliverance from bondage is a free gift of God for the Christian. Yet the Passover of Christ also means that the Christian has to relinquish absolutely both the fact and desire to remain spiritually in Egypt, in the realm of what Paul calls "this age/world," marked by folly, wickedness, and transitoriness (see 1 Cor. 3:19; 5:10; 7:31).

The Old Testament Passover was a sacrifice, that is, the transferring of the gift of the worshipper out of the realm of the profane into the realm of the sacred. The shift of the children of Israel from bondage in Egypt to the land that God wished them to inherit exemplifies this sacrificial transfer from the profane to the sacred on a larger scale. For Paul, precisely the same thing happens to the Christian who, through the Passover sacrifice effected by Jesus Christ, is transferred out of slavery and placed on the road to the Promised Land. Living as this new People of God means living in a time *after* Christ their Passover was sacrificed, that is, after their liberation from servitude but *before* their full entry into the Promised Land.

The Christian is therefore inexorably on a journey. During that journey, he must continually make choices that either affirm or deny what the Passover of Christ had accomplished for him. Because these decisions have real consequences, the actions of the immoral man in 1 Corinthians 5 cause repercussions in his own life and in that of the whole Corinthian community. The time following the Passover of Christ becomes a time of decision for the immoral man, for the whole congregation, and for all Christians. The significance and gravity of this time of decision was captured by Hans Urs von Balthasar:

Time in fact is either real time, in which man encounters God and accepts his will, or it is unreal time, lost and corrupted: times as the finite in self-contradiction, and unredeemed promise, a space full of nothing, duration leading nowhere.³⁸

III. Passover and Tradition

Passover was not a passive deposit that was handed on from one generation of Israelites to another. Rather, each generation put something of themselves into Passover through their reflection on and reliving of the Passover liberation. The meaning of the feast for the ancient Israelite was not idle; it enriched itself from within. Reflecting on and thinking with Sacred Scripture, Paul lived out and dialogued with the religious traditions of his people. In this way he offers disciples of the new covenant a fruitful example of understanding and responding to the faith we have inherited, live out, and hope to pass on.

As has been noted, life and history are intensely scriptural for the children of Israel. Since Scripture was their touchstone, they continuously mined its depths to find out meaning for the world in which they lived. In several important metanarratives such as Passover, they found a significance that was so pregnant with divine meaning that it could aptly be transferred to whatever new state of affairs in history in which they discovered themselves. In turn, each reuse of the Passover texts of the Old Testament did two things. First, it contributed something uniquely new from the current historical situation to the overarching Passover paradigm growing out of Scripture. Second, each reuse made it all the more likely that Passover would again be used by a succeeding generation as a lens through which to see its world. Passover becomes free to pick up any number of new additional meanings.³⁹

Each new Passover was as a new instrument joining an ongoing and ever-growing symphony. In light of the development of paschal thought in Judaism, Paul's use of Passover was neither capricious nor egregious. Rather, he was simply continuing a course already laid out within Scripture itself.

38 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *A Theology of History* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 41.

39 George Steiner (*Real Presences* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991], 40) observes: "Veiled in analysis and metamorphic exposition, the *Ur-text* is no longer immediate to its native ground. [The new context] underwrites the continued authority and survival of the primary discourse. It liberates the meaning from that of historical-geographical contingency. In dispersion, the text is homeland." While Steiner writes of literary texts, he also acknowledges the religious dimension of what he states. Writing of how tradition, born of scriptural reflection, functions in Catholic theology, Yves Congar (*The Meaning of Tradition* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004], 121) states: "Tradition is not merely memory; it is actual presence and experience. It is not purely conservative, but, in a certain way, creative. It is not inert but living. (There is more in the original source than in the stream it feeds)." Here Congar acknowledges his debt to the thought of M. Blondel.

Because of the great fecundity of the Old Testament Passover, Paul and the first Christian generation searched the Scriptures of Israel assiduously to find therein the symbol(s) that might begin to express the awesome realities present in Jesus Christ. Paul could find in Passover a symbol empowered by Scripture and salvation history to be exceptionally suited to the revelation and proclamation of the mystery of Christ, a symbol that “contains a possibility of total communion, and its faithful repetition expresses [a truth] that escapes all conceptual analysis.”⁴⁰ This recognition apprehends that there is “continuity through time that flows past, but it is a *historical* continuity: it is the permanence of the past in the present, from the heart of which it prepares the future.”⁴¹ Within Christian theology, this “other-than-historical framework” stands at the heart of the concept of Sacred Tradition.

Because he was a faithful Jew, Paul experienced the continuing presence of the saving events of Israel’s history in his present. The “spiritual fusion” which took place when the riches of Passover met the richness of Christ is a singular example of the theological use of tradition. This understanding of tradition was expressed superbly by Yves Congar:

Tradition is not merely the technical transmission of a passive deposit. The very concept implies the delivery of an object from the possession of one person to another, and therefore the transition from one living being to another. It is *incorporated* into a *subject*, a *living* subject. A living subject necessarily puts something of himself into what he receives. When he receives a teaching . . . it always assumes a certain quality of dialogue. [Traditions] of their very nature include something that arouses a response in the person addressed. A message, and this is particularly true of the apostolic message, is destined for someone so that he may live it.⁴²

Christ, the Passover of the Corinthian church, was not simply a theological truth to be assented to, but a tradition—in the very best sense of that word—destined for Paul’s spiritual children to live and thereby to be transformed.

40 Congar, *The Meaning of Tradition*, 74.

41 Congar, *The Meaning of Tradition*, 74. The connection thus generated between the text and the reader—in this case Paul and the Old Testament—is all the more profound because the truth in the text speaks on an existential level to the truth within the reader.

42 Congar, *The Meaning of Tradition*, 112.

Conclusion

During the period after he had heard the disheartening news from Corinth, the apostle Paul strove to seek out something—anything—that might shake the immoral man and the whole Corinthian congregation from their apathy about the situation they had permitted to arise within the church. After the first torrent of words came forth, declaring that the man must be handed over to Satan, the apostle's mind slowed. Commands without reasons would not help the congregation at all. Because Paul wanted to treat his converts as capable adults—and because he was aware that his letter would be read aloud to one and all gathered together—Paul knew that he had to frame his catechesis in terms that were inescapably strong, theologically astute, and rhetorically concise. As he pondered his response, Paul's trained and prolific mind cast about seeking some way to impress upon his converts everything contained in the situation with which they were content to live.

In an extraordinarily adroit act of interpretative retrieval, the apostle laid hold of a time-honored image that had proved itself capable again and again of bearing fresh interpretations and charged with remarkable power to both nourish and challenge God's people: Passover. Using it somehow in constructing his argument would make the conclusion Paul hoped for all but foregone, but how to do so? With piercing insight, the apostle's imagination leapt across a hermeneutical chasm that no one else in the long centuries of reflection on Passover had done or thought to do—he identified Passover with a person—Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. As he plunged through this symbolic doorway, Paul entered a theological world far larger on the inside than the few letters of the written word suggest. On the contrary, this “theological iceberg” seemed compact, docile, and obvious on the surface, while a great mass of spiritual truth, beautiful and perilous, lay beneath the surface. Here Paul found not only an answer to the situation of the immoral man of Corinth, but the whole outworking of God's plan of salvation encapsulated. And so, the many words of Scripture and Tradition became for Paul, in the end, the One Word: our Passover, who is Christ.

In Passover was another signpost on the road to discovering and expressing who Jesus Christ is. He is the way to the Father; he is the son of his people; he is the savior sent to rescue those who trust in him. Herein his disciples discover their own self-identity and where their journey in this passing world is taking them. Herein the deep roots of God's plan of salvation history, embedded in Scripture and articulated through an inimitable worldview, are found. Thus was begun an entirely new chapter in the history of Passover reflection, a period that has been offering ever-abundant fruit to the People of God for two millennia.

Paul addresses himself to the Christians of Corinth, yet he is conscious that they are not his only audience. He also speaks explicitly to “all who call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in every place.”⁴³ Thus, in a certain very real sense, 1 Corinthians is a Pauline letter for everyone, including we who, at the beginning of the third Christian millennium, “call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Just as Paul’s stunning declaration to the Corinthians that “Christ our Passover has been sacrificed” was meant to move them to both greater contemplation and swifter action, so too Paul’s words echo down the ages to us. They bid us to become more than inert readers of a silent text, and instead passionate disciples investigating all the treasures contained in the apostle’s words and living them in eloquent witness before the rest of the world. Jesus Christ has offered himself to be our Passover, and therefore nothing in my life or your life can ever be the same. In him, we are freed from all slavery to death and sin. A long and demanding journey remains before us, but, secure in the costly love demonstrated in our Passover, we can be serenely confident in our progress to the land of promise.

43 1 Cor. 1:3.

